

# Rufous Fishing Owl: how to see one - maybe!

**S**o few birders have seen the Rufous Fishing Owl in the wild that it is impossible to identify any particular locality where you would have any more than an outside chance of finding one. One place, however, where it has been recorded recently is Lamto in southern-central Côte d'Ivoire. The Station Ecologique de Lamto is a 2500ha field station and nature reserve belonging to the University of Abidjan, situated along the eastern bank of the Bandama river. This is in the transition zone between the rain forest and southern Guinea savanna, and the vegetation comprises a mixture of wooded savanna, in which the Borassus Palm *Borassus aethiopicum* is a conspicuous feature, intersected by gallery forest. Beside the Bandama there is a wider ribbon of riverine forest.

The field station's buildings are five minutes walk down a rough track from the river's edge. Here, there is a small landing area for fishermens' dugouts that provides a point of vantage over the river. Arrival here before dawn can be rewarding! Even if Rufous Fishing Owl does not co-operate (the only record is of an immature in December<sup>1</sup> - on Christmas Day!) there is the possibility of Pel's Fishing-Owl and White-backed Night Heron *Gorsachius leuconotus*, while White-

crested Tiger Heron *Tigriornis leucolophus* is seen regularly enough to reward your early start. You will also be able to see the last mentioned species at dusk. Lamto (shown on Michelin map 975 of Côte d'Ivoire) is some 180km north of Abidjan, an easy, two-hour drive nearly all of which is over tarmac. The road from Abidjan is the country's main north-south axis so many buses and taxis pass the turn-off to the field station. Traffic along the final 15km murrum road is infrequent so those without transport can have a long wait - or a long walk. You can usually find good, cheap accommodation and food at the Ecological Station (not the Geophysical Station which one reaches first). However, this does not apply if your visit coincides with a university field course! It is therefore sensible, as well as being common courtesy, to seek permission to visit Lamto in advance. As a research station, Lamto has duties other than to accommodate itinerant birders! Write to: The Director, Station Ecologique de Lamto, B. P. 28, N'Douci, Côte d'Ivoire. Staff there are, however, very welcoming and used to people turning up periodically unannounced. ☺

<sup>1</sup> *Malimbus* 1991 12: 61-86

*Lincoln Fishpool*

## Finding fishing owls in southern Cameroon

**B**oth Pel's and Vermiculated Fishing Owl occur in Cameroon but are rarely observed by birders. However in 1989 a site in southern Cameroon proved reliable for Pel's, and provided tantalising glimpses of Vermiculated.

Both were observed along the Nyong river west of the town of Akonolinga and adjacent to the village of Ndibi which lies on a peninsula on the south bank of the river. Akonolinga can easily be reached from Yaoundé by bush-taxi in a couple of hours, and has plenty of basic accommodation. Ndibi can be reached either by walking across the Nyong river road-bridge then turning right and walking for several hours along dirt tracks to the village, or by renting a pirogue from a fisherman below the road-bridge and gently paddling downstream. There is no accommodation in Ndibi, but camping is easy.

The area in which the owls were observed was on the south bank of the Nyong river below the village and could be accessed by a forest track. The habitat consists of a 2km-wide flood plain and floating grass community, backed by seasonally inundated swamp forest. The area experiences considerable seasonal change. In the main dry season (January-May) fires

frequently burn along the open flood plain and occasionally enter the swamp forest. During the major rainy season the Nyong river rises by 6-7m, inundating the flood plain and flooding the adjacent forest.

The owls were easiest to observe during the dry season, when the river was confined to the river-channel. The owls could then be watched hunting where the forest came down to the river bank and trees overhung the water. Activity commenced soon after dark and good views could be obtained by sitting quietly and occasionally illuminating the birds by torchlight for a few seconds. Pel's Fishing Owls are extremely vocal and can be located by listening for the characteristic low grunting hoot, or by a high-pitched screaming wail which appears to be associated with the soliciting of food. Although no actual catches were observed, birds could be seen 'mantling' freshly caught fish on branches overhanging the water. The best views, however, were obtained when birds were occasionally discovered by day, roosting in the crowns of forest trees up to 1km away from the river, when the true beauty of the species could be appreciated. ☺

*Duncan McNiven*